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What's in a name?

The Society for the Study of Medical Ethics has metamorphosed to become the Institute of Medical Ethics. Is the change of any interest to anybody other than printers of letterheads and compilers of directories? Time will show but the *intention* is to mark an important development, already in process, towards becoming a major national resource in medical ethics, perhaps analogous to the American Hastings Center or the Kennedy Institute, or better still a combination of the best features of each.

So far the society has had a reasonable record in stimulating and assisting others to promote the multidisciplinary study of medical ethics. Almost every British medical school has a student group similar to the London Medical Group, and each provides a series of discussions largely relating to medical ethics by way of extracurricular leisure activity for interested medical and other health-care students. The society has also set up several multidisciplinary working groups to research and report on particular facets of medical ethics including resource allocation, dying, and, most recently, medical ethics education. In 1975 the society founded this journal, which again encourages rational multidisciplinary analysis of medicomoral issues.

However, as awareness of and critical thinking (in both senses) about the problems of medical ethics become more widespread at various levels, the demands for assistance can be expected to continue to escalate, with the institute becoming the focus of more and more requests for information, ideas and advice. The media want some ethical background to the latest medicomoral story; members of the public contribute their ideas and opinions and/or ask for further information about medicomoral issues which concern them. Students – notably medical students but also students from a variety of other disciplines – ask for reading lists. Some ask for more specific help with a particular research project in medical ethics. Academics say they wish to teach medical ethics and ask for help in setting up courses: a few want to pursue their own research and seek assistance in making the appropriate contacts and wonder if the institute has its own research facilities such as a specialist library, a multidisciplinary group of researchers, seminar,

lecture and conference facilities, office space and scholarships. Others ask for funds to enable them to attend courses, take time off to study medical ethics, or inaugurate projects. Politicians, lawyers, clergy, interested in pursuing some aspect of medical ethics ask – or ask their researchers to ask – for relevant information – (preferably immediately and preferably predigested, at least in the case of politicians and the press). Medical ethics enthusiasts from all over the world say they are coming to Britain to pursue their researches and seek help to do so. Publishers say they want to publish books on medical ethics and ask for authors – some even offer to increase the number of subscriptions to the journal – provided they can publish it.

Many such projects are worthy of vigorous and extensive support by adequately and appropriately trained personnel having access to the appropriate resources (including for example an excellent medical ethics library). However, the support which the society has been able to offer has necessarily been limited by its size – in terms of personnel, in terms of funding, and in terms of physical space – and by its lack of academic resources. The change of name indicates an ambition within the institute and among its supporters to overcome these limitations and grow to meet the demands quite properly being made upon it. Among the intentions of the institute are to provide by means of a bulletin regular synoptic information about what is going on in medical ethics across its whole spectrum and also the establishment of an organisation to which people with an interest in medical ethics can belong and with which they may identify. Central to achieving all these ambitions is new and permanent funding several orders of magnitude greater than the mostly soft money hitherto made available by its relatively few, though in some cases exceedingly generous, benefactors. Whether or not these objectives will be realised – whether or not the change of name indicates a change of substance – will largely depend on the result of this search for new and substantial funds. The spirit within the institute is willing. We must hope that the flesh – and especially the fleshpots – do not prove weak.
